

VICTORIA - Need a top executive to fill a vital space in your company?

The search for the right person for the right job may be more difficult than expected. Many companies are turning to headhunters to find their target, but are their services worth the price?

Finding the right professional to fill a senior position can be a key determinant of organizational success. But just how does an organization find and place the best talent? Most organizations would either advertise the vacancy in the local newspaper or use an executive network. In either case, the best talent remains untapped because the best candidates are not looking for a job and there is usually a limit to the number of talented people anyone can know.

To avoid such circumstances, you might turn to an executive search consultancy. This is an organization that will source, screen, assess and select a strategic fit to meet your requirements. A good executive search consultancy, also known as a headhunter, will do more than match skills and fill seats:

Today's headhunter is a bona fide confidante, skilled in the art of corporate matchmaking and comfortable with the latest research methodologies. It is ironic that one would not base a marriage on hearsay, yet filling a corporate position in business is often entrusted to a lot less.

Headhunting started in the US in the 50's and at its core, the basic technique has not changed much since then: After being assigned to find a "head", the hunter will set out to learn where the best skills in a particular field are based and who the best talent is to fill the client's requirements.

Once the hunter has identified the targets, they move in with a discreet telephone call, suggesting a private meeting. What follows is corporate matchmaking, involving an interview to assess the cultural match, a meeting with the client and finally, a lucrative offer.

For his services, a headhunter will receive a fee, usually a percentage of the placed candidate's annual salary with a third down in advance to cover the research. Because it may be more expensive than the newspaper advertising route (headhunters seldom advertise positions), headhunting is usually only used at the executive level.

Headhunters get mixed reviews: Some executives will not entrust their recruitment to anyone else; others are suspicious of their integrity and doubtful of their efficacy. However, there is general agreement - high as their fees may be, if they produce the right person for the job, it is worth every penny.

If one considers the cost of placing a wrong candidate in the position, it could cost an organization a lot more than a headhunter's fee. To some, headhunting is unethical and seen as poaching an executive from an organization that has probably spent thousands of dollars training and grooming for the future.

Yet there is little difference between advertising and telephoning the executive directly - in either case, the final decision to leave an organization is made by the candidates themselves. Very often, organizations do not pay a good executive enough to prevent them from wandering.

In today's corporate jungle, there is a need for the headhunter, especially when the kind of person an organization is looking for is at the top of their profession: They are not looking at newspaper advertisements, let alone responding to them. So a good headhunter can be of use, especially when the economy is hot and suddenly everyone is shouting for talent.

In North America the headhunter's methods are widely accepted with approximately 70% of all senior positions being filled through executive search, and that figure is growing steadily.

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